

Striving 'to Preserve the Past — Not Live in It'

Rural & Historical Society Gets New Director

By Lesley Mahoney

Marsha Solberg is no stranger to the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society.

She has volunteered for the society for more than a decade, starting out as a docent at the King Caesar House and later presiding as the society's president for two years. After an interim of a few years in the business world, Solberg is back as the society's new executive director.

Coincidentally, she says, she decided to leave her marketing job at the same time the Rural & Historical Society's former executive director, Alexandra Earle,

decided to leave her post. While Solberg's position did not become effective until Nov. 1, she has been phasing into the job for the past month.

The transition has been easy for Solberg in the sense that she already knows a lot about the society and many of the people involved. Now, she is busy "trying to learn the finer details of running the whole organization."

While Solberg has many ideas of her own, she credits Earle, the first to occupy the executive director seat, for bringing a sense of "professionalism" to the organization. In the last 10 years,

Solberg says, there has been a "real evolution of the organization itself." Instead of just having an executive secretary, the society has changed to include a position responsible for running the day-to-day business of the society.

Earle said the position of executive director incorporated a management position in the society. Involved with the organization since 1971, she became executive director in 1988. While she is moving to Rhode Island with her husband, she said, they are lifetime members of the society. Although she is not certain of the degree to which she'll remain

involved, Earle said she will "always keep ties with the society.... Duxbury has always been our home and somehow, it always will be."

Although the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society has evolved since its founding in 1883, its agenda has remained very much the same through the years: to maintain the rural and historic character of the town. The 1996 by-laws, drafted by Solberg and Earle, state the society's purpose: "The Society is dedicated to preserving the historical and natural resources of the Town of Duxbury and to encouraging awareness and appreciation of the town's heritage and rural character."

But Solberg is quick to point out that preserving the past does not necessitate being stifled by it. She said the society's role in town is "to preserve the past — not live in it. We want to preserve our heritage for our children but, at the same time, not stifle growth or progress. There is a fine balance there."

As executive director, Solberg wants to keep this balance going. She stresses that it is important to be watchful of new development — not to exclude, but to exercise discretion.

Noting that the architecture of the town has survived for hundreds of years, she said that "something of today is the past." Solberg believes it is important to communicate that actions have "a sense of legacy" — to make people aware that "history continues — to stop and think before making decisions ... there are layers of history."

Solberg explained that the Rural & Historical Society is not very political, that its function is to educate the community, not to



Marsha Solberg, newly appointed executive director of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, in the library of the society's Drew House.

Staff Photo by David Lane

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dictate. "Rather than taking a stand, we put more effort into disseminating information," she said.

Along the same lines, Solberg stressed the society's movement toward focusing on teaching a "living history" of the town versus studying artifacts. The idea is to look at how people lived, their family life: to "focus more on who the Westons and the Bradfords were," to ask, "How many men drowned at sea? How many women ran life while the men were gone?"

While continuing in the professional vein of Earle, Solberg has some ideas of her own in mind for the society.

"I would like to make people

more aware of the vitality that this organization has," she said, noting that there seems to be an image that it is "conservative or stuffy.... I would like to change that perception."

Solberg also wants to reach out to other communities. "I don't think we've marketed ourselves well enough," she said, hoping adults and children from other communities will come to see what Duxbury has to offer historically. Solberg has an edge with her background in marketing.

With the advent of the society's professionalism, Solberg says that the society has plans to work with a public relations specialist to address image and outreach issues.

The Rural & Historical Society's new director would also like to see more people become involved with the organization.— to increase its membership, especially among people new to town. She stressed, "You don't have to live in an old house (to be a member)." Solberg wants to draw membership from all over town, saying that new houses are affected by the society's mission as well.

Solberg, who lives on Washington Street with her husband and 7-year-old child, says it's all about striking a balance. Between maintaining land, preserving history and holding educational programs, the society's role covers a broad spectrum.

And Earle is confident that Solberg will continue the tradition of the society and see it through its continuing evolution.